

Charles Rangel, chairman of the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee, is intent on raising \$30 million for a new academic center in his New York district -- a center with his name on it. After securing an earmark and two other federal grants totaling some \$2.6 million for the project, the Democratic congressman wrote letters on his congressional stationery to businesses with interests before his committee. They sought meetings to help him fulfill his "personal dream" of seeing the Charles B. Rangel Center for Public Service completed.

The House Ethics Committee will examine the legality of Mr. Rangel's requests, but the bigger question is why Congress hands out money to name buildings, bridges -- everything under the sun -- after its own living members. Until roughly the 1960s, people had to die before a grateful nation memorialized them in granite. The Lincoln Memorial wasn't dedicated until a full half century after the Great Emancipator's death. Ditto for Franklin Roosevelt. George Washington had to wait 89 years for his memorial.

Now it seems almost every committee chairman gets some "Monument to Me" named after himself with the tab going to the taxpayer. There's a navigation lock in Pennsylvania named after Rep. C.W. "Bill" Young, the former GOP chair of the House Appropriations Committee. He represents St. Petersburg, Fla. -- his only connection to Pennsylvania is that he happened to be born there. Nor is that Mr. Young's only monument. The C.W. Young Center for Bio-Defense and Emerging Infectious Disease was dedicated at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., last year.

Indeed, the NIH campus is replete with monuments to the congressional patrons who shoveled cash to it. Buildings there honor still-living pols such as Mark Hatfield, Louis Stokes and Lowell Weicker. Attempts in 2006 to have the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta name its "Global Communications Center" after Sen. Tom Harkin (D., Iowa) and its operations center after Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) were blocked at the last minute by Congressional grinchers such as Jeff Flake (R., Ariz.) and **John Campbell** (R., Calif.).

Rep. Campbell says that members of Congress cover for each other when it comes to glory grabs. Last year, the two-term lawmaker objected to an earmark for Mr. Rangel's academic center because "spending taxpayer funds in the creation of things named after ourselves while we're still here" was inappropriate. He was swatted down on a bipartisan 316-108 vote. Mr. Rangel, who has been in office since 1971, dismissed Mr. Campbell's objection: "I would have a problem if you did it, because I don't think that you've been around long enough . . . to inspire a building like this."

If longevity in Congress is linked to the number of projects named after a living member, the Immortality Prize clearly goes to Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia. John Stossel of ABC News found the Democrat's name attached to three dozen taxpayer-funded entities in his state, including a highway interchange, education and technology centers and even a telescope. Josh Hagen, a geographer at Marshall University in West Virginia, says all that name-dropping clearly confers benefits. "Name recognition is a big plus for a politician," he told the Associated Press. "All place names create a kind of invincibility."

Indeed, Mr. Byrd is unrepentant, telling Congress in 2001: "Pork has been a good investment in West Virginia, if you look around and see what I have done." Taxpayers for Common Sense notes it's easy for him to say that when he's spending other people's money, and asks what's next: rechristening the state "West 'Byrd'ginia?"

Some politicians are now spreading this name recognition to their spouses. How else to explain the Erma Ora Byrd Hall, a 37,000 square foot facility at Shepherd University (Shepherdstown, W. Va.) named after Mr. Byrd's late wife? Or the Joyce Murtha Breast Cancer Center in Wendover, Pa., named after House Appropriations honcho John Murtha? He already has the matching John P. Murtha Regional Cancer Center named after himself in nearby Johnstown.

In Arkansas, former Republican Gov. Mike Huckabee and his wife Janet have a lake named after themselves. There is also the Janet Huckabee Nature Center.

It was the constant naming of projects like that that stirred Arkansas state Rep. Dan Greenberg to action. Last year, he introduced the "Edifice Complex Prevention Bill" to put limits on the practice in the state. "I discovered a local park had been named after me and other legislators without my knowledge," he told me. "But that wasn't enough for one legislator who complained that the sign with her name on it wasn't in her campaign colors."

Mr. Greenberg's fellow legislators treated him like the proverbial skunk at the picnic. His bill was killed in committee on an 11-3 vote, with one legislator pulling him aside and bluntly asking him "Now tell me the truth, wouldn't you like a building named after you?" Mr. Greenberg says he would if he paid for it, but the practice of "using taxpayer money to build temples to ourselves as public servants is dangerous." He plans to reintroduce his proposal again next year.

One reason to restrict the practice of naming infrastructure after living politicians, notes Mr. Greenberg, is that they're still around to embarrass us. After Rep. Robert Ney, an Ohio Republican, pleaded guilty to corruption charges in 2006, the athletic center named after him at Ohio University was quietly "rebranded."

In 2000, Georgia renamed its old Memorial Drive in Atlanta after Rep. Cynthia McKinney. She promptly proceeded to accuse the Bush administration of knowledge of the 9/11 attacks and then assaulted a Capitol Hill police officer, incidents which led to the Democrat's eventual defeat. Attempts to remove her name from the parkway have nonetheless failed.

Still, some progress has been made. A Georgia state legislative committee has ruled that only people with national or regional recognition who have been out of office for two years or are dead can be honored by having something named after themselves.

But the simple truth is that in most cases the only effective curbs on the Edifice Complex are self-restraint and sometimes shame. An example of restraint came last year when former Tennessee Republican Sen. Fred Thompson asked that a stretch of highway back home not be named "Fred Thompson Boulevard." "It is entirely appropriate that it remain Highway 43, the way I remember it was when I was a boy," he wrote state legislators trying to confer the honor.

As for shame, that clearly has its limits. Last month, Mr. Rangel was asked if he is likely to seek a fourth federal appropriation to help build the academic center named after him. "I will be trying again to get earmarks," he told the Washington Post. "I try to help my community as much as I can." But if that's the case why does his name have to be on it?